

ENHANCING THE PRONUNCIATION OF ENGLISH SUPRASEGMENTAL FEATURES THROUGH REFLECTIVE LEARNING METHOD

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Abstract: Suprasegmental features are of paramount importance in spoken English. Yet, these pronunciation features are marginalised in EFL/ESL teaching-learning. This article reported a study that was aimed at improving the students' mastery of English suprasegmental features through the use of reflective learning method. The study adopted Kemmis and McTaggart's model of action research (1986) and involved twenty-four undergraduate students at Muhammadiyah University of Purwokerto, Indonesia as the subjects. The research consisted of two cycles, and data were gathered through observations, recorded conversations, diaries, interviews, and tests. Overall, the study has shown that reflective method using video integrated into communicative activities enhanced students' pronunciation mastery. Interestingly, some students' pronunciation to a great extent sounded 'more English'.

Keywords: suprasegmentals, reflective, involvement, monitoring, evaluating

Pronunciation might be the most marginalised in the teaching and learning of English in spite of a key role this language aspect plays in spoken communication. The neglect for teaching pronunciation may be due to the apparent complexity of English pronunciation and a misconception about what the content of a pronunciation course should be and about the way pronunciation should be taught. Within this "Cinderella" aspect of language, perhaps segmentals are luckier, in that they are more taught and better researched than suprasegmentals. However, suprasegmentals are worthier of attention mainly because these features contribute heavily to intelligibility in spoken English and convey bet-

ter impression of the speaker (O'Neal, 2010). It means improving the pronunciation of English suprasegmentals can facilitate communication, boost self esteem, and possibly lead to a better future. Therefore, within the context of spoken English communication, suprasegmental features should be given priority or, at least, equality.

Apart from the significance of wisely treating English suprasegmental features, several problems emerged during the author's teaching of suprasegmental features: uninteresting lessons, lack of listening to model activity prior to production practice, greater portion of teacher talk time, and too much drill. In addition, the results of a formative test on connected speech showed a very low result, with only one student (4.16%) achieving existing standard. Therefore, as an effort to solve the problems, reflective learning method was adopted by using video as a reflective tool incorporated into oral communicative language activities.

The term 'reflective' (as it appears in 'reflective learning'), used interchangeably with 'reflection' in the educational context, is associated with deep learning. In deep learning, the intention of the learner is to develop a personal understanding of the material and relate it to what is already known. In other words, experience is central in reflective learning. It has something to do with Kolb's (1984) concept of experiential learning, in which the learner's immediate experience is taken as the focus of learning, giving life, texture, and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts and at the same time providing a concrete reference point for testing the implications and validity of ideas created during the learning process (Benson, 2001, p. 38).

Dewey, as cited by Hillier (2002) identified five general features of reflection or reflective thinking: (1) perplexity/doubt due to the fact that one is implicated in an incomplete situation whose character is not fully determined; (2) conjectural anticipation, i.e. a tentative interpretation of the elements; (3) examination/ exploration or analysis of all attainable considerations which will define and clarify the problem at hand; (4) consequent elaboration of the tentative hypothesis; and (5) taking one stand upon the projected hypothesis as a plan of action, doing something overtly to bring about the anticipated result and thereby testing the hypothesis. This implies that the act of reflecting is not just a simple rushing into a trial-and-error approach. It is a way of minimising surface approaches.

In connection with the teaching of the pronunciation of English suprasegmental phonemes, being engaged in reflection process, students will make use

of their existing experience for testing ideas and assumptions exploratively. They, though in uncertain situations or in trouble with such features (e.g. intonation, rhythm, and stress) which are indisputably commonly considered complicated to master, will strive for a solution, a commitment to continuous learning by seeking new ideas, evaluating and reflecting on their impact and trying out new practices and ways of learning to improve their own effectiveness in the learning environment.

Cercone (2008) notes that adults need to self-reflect on the learning process. For this, she suggests that instructors provide ways most possible for learners to engage in metacognitive reflection such as the use of logs and reflective journals. In the present study, video is chosen to help create a condition which best favors reflective learning. Video has fixative property, with which it can record, save, and reproduce information when needed (Suwatno, 2012). With these characteristics, students can utilize video to record, play and replay events.

In recounting situations, the immediacy of the moment recorded in video is not lost, as is the behavior in relation to the emotion/ feeling. This provides the opportunity to talk through the experience. In this way, the adult learners/ students can be motivated to learn by internal rewards, such as increased self-esteem and a sense of accomplishment. By using the recorded communicative events, students have video feedback on their development. This also highlights their strengths, which they often ignore. They can then modify their behavior accordingly, either in isolation or with support of teacher and/or peers. Facial expressions and gestures that often accompany accented utterances will be of special interest to students. This all helps raise learners' awareness. True awareness develops in adult but not in child (Thompson and Gaddes, 2005). However, degree of reflectivity can be boosted with reflection process. It is for this reason teachers should promote and take control over students' reflection process so that their self-awareness becomes optimized. With adequate awareness, learners are able to self-monitor and self-evaluate their own learning. Monitoring and evaluating are essential elements of reflection process.

Reflection is even stronger when the learning of suprasegmental pronunciation is incorporated into oral communication activities that include both reception and production practices. By playing a target model recording, for instance, students can listen and watch and get insight into target linguistic and nonlinguistic (nonverbal) input that is useful for their production. Alip (2009) argues for the value of receptive activity prior to productive task in the teaching

of English suprasegmentals pronunciation. A seemingly similar study by Wulandari et al. (2008) has shown that teaching English pronunciation using audio visual aids resulted in improved suprasegmentals, notably intonation and stress. The current study was aimed at describing how reflective learning method can improve the students' pronunciation of English suprasegmental features.

METHOD

The main goal of this research study was to improve the teacher's own instructional practices. Action research was chosen because it is a type of practitioner research that is used to learn and improve classroom practitioner's own teaching activities (Gay and Airasian, 2000). This study adopted Kemmis and McTaggart's model of action research (1986), and involved twenty-four second semester students of Class C2 at the English Language Education Department of Muhammadiyah University of Purwokerto, Indonesia. The students attended Pronunciation 2 course in the 2011/2012 academic year. As part of an initial reflection of the teaching practice, a preliminary observation was conducted by a colleague (co researcher) in the author's pronunciation class to record the pre-intervention condition and help identify problems. The collaborative study contained two cycles, each of which comprised three weekly sessions. Every session lasted 100 minutes.

The co researcher participated in most activities of the research. Main learning activities/tasks in each session covered listening to target model, rehearsing monologue or a dialogue, video-recording, and playing video clip. Scripts were provided just to help the students memorise what to say. Videos available on the campus language labs' computers were made use to facilitate students' reflection process.

Two types of data were gathered: data on teaching and learning process (qualitative data) and data on learning outcomes (quantitative data). The qualitative data included teaching and learning activities, teacher's behavior, and student's behavior and perception, while the quantitative data dealt with the test result. Qualitative data were elicited through observation, reflective diary, and interview, while the quantitative data were collected through recorded conversation tasks and tests.

Observations were done by the co researcher using checklist. The students were provided with small notebooks for writing diary and given necessary di-

rection. Interviews with some students were carried out by the co researcher in order that the interviewees feel free in giving response. Monologue or dialogue practice video clips handed in by the students were reviewed, scored and then given written or oral feedback. Tests were administered before and after each cycle and scored by the co researcher and the teacher-researcher independently. The technique employed in the test was reading aloud. A right answer was scored 1, whereas a wrong answer 0. To reduce inconsistency, both raters equipped themselves with guidelines developed beforehand.

Qualitative data were analysed via analytic induction method to identify common themes and to extract narratives of experience. Quantitative data were analysed to calculate statistical frequencies, percentages, and means. Triangulation – more than one methods of investigation – was employed to establish validity of the research (Bryman, 1988), namely investigator triangulation and method triangulation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In regard to the use of reflective learning method in this action research study, the intervention was a successful attempt to improve the pronunciation of English suprasegmental features. Reflective learning method using video which was integrated into communicative, meaningful language activities has encouraged student involvement in the learning process. Involvement was primary concern of the pre-intervention condition. Student involvement increased as most observed behavior was detected during teaching-learning process. Behavior that fostered student involvement included answering questions spontaneously, responding to learning tasks, seriously doing in-class works, and completing learning tasks on time. Figure 1 shows the average occurrences of each type of behavior per cycle.

Until the end of intervention implementation, three types of observed behavior: student question raising, feedback giving and self-criticism or self-correction remained a problem even though certain effort had been taken. Within six sessions no students seemed to show initiative for raising questions (behavior 3) and a few gave feedback to peers (behavior 5) and commented on their own performance or self-corrected own errors (behavior 6).

Dealing with student learning process, the results in first cycle indicated that the students' activity in following the teaching-learning process reached an average of 57.37% compared to the criteria of succes of intervention which was

60%. Minor revisions in intervention implementation eventually brought about better teaching-learning quality in second cycle. As can be seen from Figure 2, a number of behavior identified from session to session tended to increase.

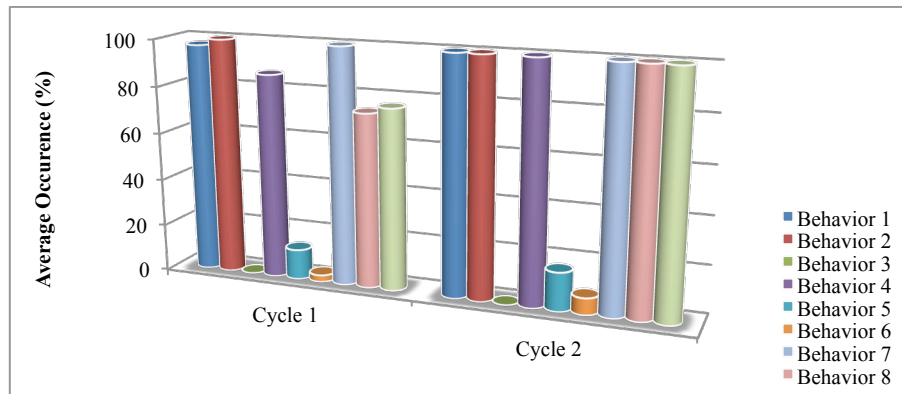


Figure 1. Number of Occurrences of Behavior by Type per Cycle

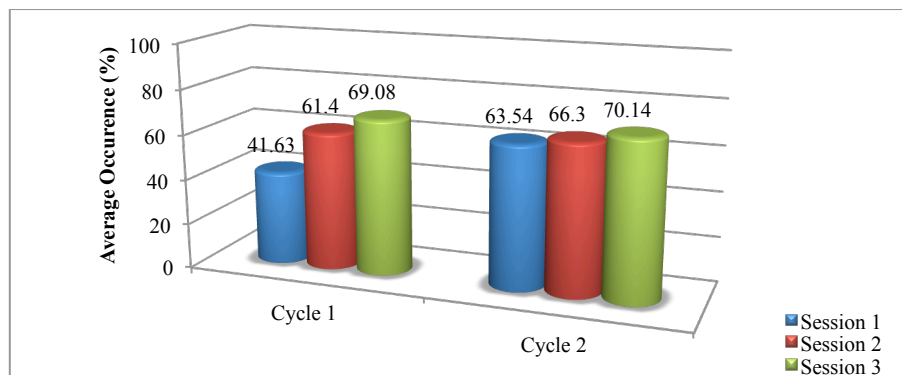


Figure 2. Number of Occurrences of Behavior per Session

It is interesting to see that a majority of the students gave positive response to the instruction adopted. Based on the data elicited through diary, five to six categories of response have been identified, as illustrated in Figure 3.

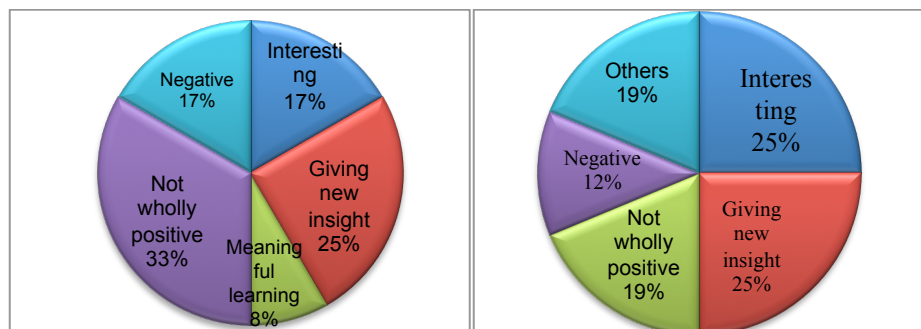


Figure 3. Sample of Student Responses to the Instruction

“Not wholly positive” constituted responses that contained partly negative responses. “Others” were responses that seemed irrelevant or did not fall into any category already mentioned, for example notes on stress patterns, or personal health. Figure 3 shows that positive responses make up around 50 to 83 percent of the whole responses at the end of first cycle (left) and 50 to 69 percent at the end of second cycle (right).

The improved learning process was followed by a rise in learning outcome. From the pre-intervention formative test result (baseline), it was revealed that only 4.16% of the students passed, i.e., those achieving a score no less than 50 (left). It rose sharply up to 65.21% in first cycle, and increased to 73.9% in second cycle. The average score reached was 16.25. It increased up to 53.7 in first cycle, and slightly went up to 57.17. It means the students’ pronunciation mastery improved from cycle to cycle. Since the other indicator against criteria for success of implementation intervention was; 60% of students get minimum score of 50, this standard had already been met in first cycle. Figure 4 shows the students’ pronunciation mastery before and after intervention.

It is wise to value the gain from first to second cycle, as the material taught in second cycle, i.e. stress, is considered more complicated compared to the one taught in the previous cycle, i.e. intonation. A student commented in native language in the diary: “... Today I am learning the stress of English. I think it is more complicated than intonation...”

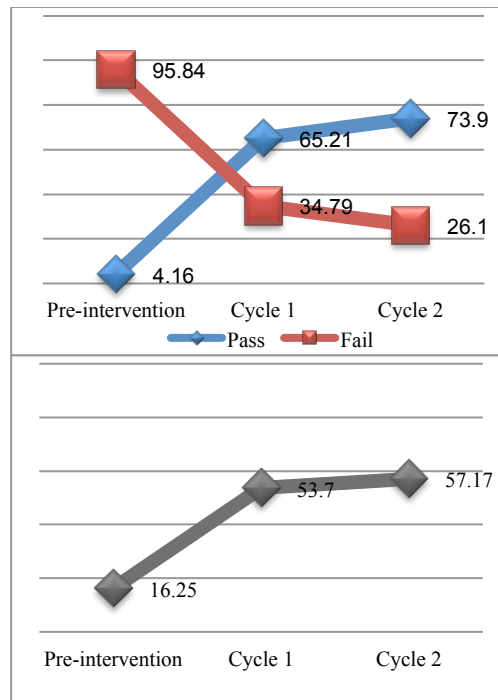


Figure 4. Students' Pronunciation Mastery of English Suprasegmentals

Within two cycles, the students' result of doing in-class learning tasks reached an average score of 3.86 (using a 5 point scale), whereas the outside class work, that is, conversation recordings submitted in the last session of each cycle showed some students' pronunciation has been much better than before the intervention was adopted. Their speech became no longer flat, filled with intonation and stress. Better segmental and suprasegmental features (i.e. connected speech) that were previously poor were also heard in their speech. In short, students' pronunciation to a some extent sounded 'more English'.

The improved student involvement in the learning process after reflective learning method was thought of to be attributable to the opportunity for using language through listening to/watching target models activity prior to production. In addition to insight into the target language in use, the students took advantage of the spoken texts as aural linguistic input along with nonlinguistic

input, such as facial movement and gestures for use in production later. This could raise self-confidence in giving oral response. Having listened to native speaker target model recording, the students almost spontaneously and enthusiastically answered questions asked by the teacher about the recording. That is why, when listening to a segment of video file containing news reading whose speech was too fast for his/her level, a student wrote the following complaint in native language in the diary: ‘...but when the video was being played I could not follow a lot just because it was too fast, so I could not catch the words.’ This means that it is necessary to have a better teaching preparation in order that learning is optimum. However, the listening/watching activity prior to productive activity was quite useful receptive skill practice to the students. This is in line with what Alip (2009) argues for in another section of this article.

During the teaching and learning activities using the method, the students also benefited from pronouncing experience in oral activities, though they just rehearsed a monologue or dialogue in front of video camera. Pronunciation teaching was not explicit any more. Instead, it was immersed in spoken communication activities. This is highly consistent with the views of many researchers and experts, including Derwing (2009) that teaching pronunciation should be integrated into oral communication skills. When making a video clip task came, the students looked eager responding to it and were busy as well as serious to rehearse the text, record, review and correct their own production. Noise and serious faces were all the atmosphere of the class during this period of recording making. This was the impact of active involvement in doing learning tasks, as the result of having reflective learning. The students became accustomed to recognising suprasegmental features produced by speakers in the target model video files, then they tried out the ways the speakers pronounce the suprasegmentals, critically reviewed production (i.e. by comparing their own production to target model) and had self-correction or mutual correction with peers in teaching and learning activities.

Interestingly enough, this part of the lessons was always longed for by the students. A student wrote this: ‘Making a video clip, it is fascinating. I can express...’ While making a recording, the students listened to/watched themselves on the computer monitor while producing verbal as well as nonverbal expressions. Having finished recording, they immediately replayed their recording (perhaps more than once), critically reviewed their speech and nonverbal expressions, quite possibly remembered prior errors, and corrected or refined them. In other words, the students carried out self-monitoring and self-

evaluation for the pronunciation of English suprasegmental phonemes in terms of on-line listening or monitoring (while speaking), off-line monitoring (after speaking), evaluating (whether criteria are being fulfilled), and correcting orally. With pronunciation model as shown on the recording that was played before conversation recording activity (and already available on each lab's computer in the last session), it was assumed that progress checking process or monitoring and evaluating the process of learning the pronunciation of suprasegmental aspects, i.e. English intonation and stress patterns, by the students went on well.

As adult learners, the students took advantage of the development of self-awareness in the form of self-monitoring and self-evaluation, that does not exist in children (Thompson and Gaddes, 2005). Their self-awareness was fostered by reflective learning method adopted. Self-monitoring and self-evaluating were associated with ability to manage learning (Wenden, 1991). In the teaching of suprasegmental pronunciation adopting reflective learning method, most of the students perceived that they were self-aware of what was going on during, after and before learning. A student commented: 'My speech is a mess, but I am trying again. Honestly, I want this way of learning to take place so often that I get accustomed to speaking English, instead of nontarget-like English.' Some students not only expressed learning difficulty being encountered, but also a clear plan, as in the following '...today's lesson is confusing because verb and adjective stress seems uncertain. Need to learn much from dictionary, the internet, or wherever...' The students' capacity for managing their own learning has developed fast; hence, it is not hard to assume that the students' learning and practice has extended to outside classroom context.

One concern that emerged in the intervention implementation was the absence and lack of occurrence of those three types of observed behavior, in spite of a particular effort done. However, relative to cultural perspectives, perhaps it is understandable. Indonesia has emerged as one of the most collectivist societies (Giles, 2003). According to Lee (2011), in most collectivist cultures, people tend to worry about losing face. Student culture exerts a potent effect on behavior in class. Taking this perspective into account, it is quite possible that students in the current study were afraid of losing face, so they avoided asking questions. If they asked questions it could mean showing-offs. If a student asked questions in class, it may also have been regarded as losing face because it indicated that he/she was not able to follow the lesson.

A student commented: 'I am still a bit confused, but if I want to ask a question to Mr. Ton using English I am afraid of making mistakes.' This was written in the diary in the last session of second cycle. It was a proof that the effect of the culture was so strong that the students got upset and forgot that they later would be permitted to ask questions in their mother tongue, and on a piece of paper if it was necessary.

In previous study conducted at secondary level, the similar crisis of self-confidence to ask questions had been resolved through encouragement and material reward, i.e. snack (Suwartono and Mayaratri, 2011). Nonetheless, this was not fully applied to the present research considering that it would not work equally well to adult learners. Giving extra points was chosen instead. Asking questions in class needs strong courage. A less self-confident student would rather wait than ask a question even when he/she does not understand something. This hinders learning, as things remained puzzled. Some data elicited through diaries also led to a conclusion that some students still encountered learning difficulties.

In addition, Lee (2011) states that in collectivist culture, it is quite rare that students in class would take the initiatives; usually they just keep silent. They are often reluctant to answer questions; they do not express their opinions freely in class. Bearing the finding above in mind, those three types of culturally bound behavior are a challenge faced by teacher-researchers, in this case those who work in the Indonesian culture.

The problems that emerged in the pre-intervention condition were no longer found in the teaching-learning of pronunciation of English suprasegmental features through reflective learning method. Previously, the "menu" of classroom activity was not appealing; after reflective method was applied, the students perceived that the classroom instruction was fascinating. The students had received inadequate listening to model activity prior to production practice; in the reflective learning, listening to/watching short segment of video file was a routine. Additionally, the greater portion of teacher talk time, too much drill, and teacher-centered activity in the former teaching-learning process was replaced by communicative, meaningful teaching-learning process through conversation during video recording task in reflective learning practice.

The use of reflective method in teaching and learning has impact on students' mastery of suprasegmental features being taught. Sufficient result of doing in-class learning tasks has affected their performance in completing outside-class task. An outside class pair-work conversation recording made by two

very weak students in first cycle, for example, contained mostly accented and connected utterances. In second cycle, another student even managed to use intonation, stress, and connected speech almost perfectly through their outside class work conversation video clips. With this improved use of intonation, stress, and connected speech, most students' pronunciation of English was to some extent no longer strong Indonesian or Javanese accent. Their utterances in monotones were less spoken; meanwhile, melodies of varying kinds became more often heard, with rising and falling intonation. In other words, their pronunciation sounded foreign-accented to some degree to be 'more English'. In previous study on connected speech by the author, it was revealed that songs helped students learn English connected speech (Suwartono, 2012). It shows how creativity in the part of teacher is vital.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

To sum up, the reflective learning method using video incorporated into oral communication activities has improved student learning process of English suprasegmental phonemes. The method adopted has boosted students' involvement in learning the pronunciation of English suprasegmental phonemes. The students got involved in adequate language practice and monitoring as well as evaluating their own learning. In addition, a majority of the students gave positive response to the instruction adopted.

The students' pronunciation mastery of English suprasegmentals considerably increased and reached the preset standard. With sufficient improvement in the mastery of suprasegmentals, notably intonation and stress, the conversation video clips handed in have apparently shown that most students' English pronunciation to some extent sounded "more English."

There are a number of implications and suggestions in light of the key findings of this research. As action research is unique within its context, for college instructors of English who face a similar problem teaching suprasegmental features, reflective learning method is a recommended solution to such problem with adaptations to existing condition. Teachers of English should care enough for suprasegmental features that are important to improve communicative competence yet have so far been neglected. Finding a way to encourage learners of English to convey intention through questions, comments, ideas is a challenge that faces instructors of English at tertiary education in Indonesia. Creativity and innovation is, therefore, quite needed by teachers, including

teachers of pronunciation. Through this being essentially *naturalistic* action research study, teachers can autonomously sharpen their creativity, innovation, critical thinking and reasoning skills while their students learn naturally. Finally, students are hopefully inspired with the learning experience obtained from the lessons. With the reflective learning experience, they creatively initiate search for relevant ways to learn pronunciation on their own, for instance, by using the video feature on cell-phones to make video clips. Control over own learning in class that extends to outside the class like this often leads to the growth of learner autonomy, as whether being aware or not learners feel committed to their own learning.

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